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ABSTRACT

This document, which was written for adult educators in Georgia, offers instructional plans and practical strategies for helping students in adult literacy, adult basic education, General Educational Development, and English-as-a-second-language programs become critical television viewers. The document begins with a discussion of why television literacy skills are especially important for the least educated groups of society. The remainder of the document presents and explains four learning activities to help adult students develop television literacy skills. In the first activity, students examine their own viewing habits and reasons for watching television. The second activity is designed to help students understand how television newscasts select the stories they cover, and the third activity explains the psychological manipulation of commercials. In the fourth activity, students learn how television creates stereotypes and how those stereotypes affect people's thinking. Some or all of the following items are included for each activity: overview and rationale; list of skills developed in the activity; materials needed; steps educators should take to prepare for and conduct the activity; discussion questions; and student handout. (MN)

Helping Students Become Critical Television Viewers
Beyond Basic Skills: Innovative Teaching Materials for Georgia's Teachers of Adults
volume 1, number 3, Spring 1997

Tom Valentine and Jenny Sandlin, Co-Editors

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Beyond

Basic Skills

Innovative Teaching Materials for Georgia's Teachers of Adults

Volume 1, Number 3

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Beyond Basic Skills offers instructional plans and practical strategies designed for immediate use by teachers in Georgia's adult literacy, ABE, GED, and ESL programs. This issue focuses on TELEVISION LITERACY. We hope you'll find these activities useful.

Tom Valentine
Jenny Sandlin
Co-Editors

Helping Students Become Critical Television Viewers

We Americans love our televisions! According to recent studies, 99% of American homes contain at least one television set, and more households have TV sets than toilets or telephones. Americans watch an average of 20 hours of TV per week and spend about 40% of their leisure time watching television.

Many students in adult basic skills programs spend more time watching TV than the average American. Statistics show that the least educated Americans watch far more television than those with at least a high school diploma. Other groups whose TV viewing is notably heavy include people who are poor, people in the South, people who are members of "minority" groups, and people who are less than happy with their lives. In essence, the profile of heavy television viewers looks an awful lot like the profile of many of the people who attend our programs. We estimate that the average adult basic skills student in Georgia watches an average of 30 to 40 hours

of TV per week.

Based on the sheer quantity of their viewing hours, you would think that our students would be experts in getting information from TV. However, many adult students don't approach television viewing critically. Although there is no denying that they get lots of information from the shows they watch, they don't always know precisely what information they are getting or how TV shapes their thoughts and beliefs.

Teachers in adult basic skills programs spend a lot of time developing students' critical reading skills and critical thinking skills, and, more generally, fostering in students a more critical stance toward life. We encourage students to think about the things they do and to take active control of their lives. If we really want to help our students to increase their critical powers, television is too rich and too omnipresent an information source to ignore.

This issue of *Beyond Basic Skills* contains four activities designed to help your students become critical viewers of television. In the first activity, they examine their own viewing habits and reasons for watching TV. The second activity is designed to help them understand just how TV newscasts select the stories they cover--and the stories they don't. Through the third activity, students will learn how we are all psychologically manipulated by commercials. The fourth activity examines the ways in which television creates stereotypes and how those stereotypes affect students' thinking.

Taken together, these four activities amount to a short course in television literacy. We believe that the activities will

have a positive impact on your classroom and that your students will appreciate instructional activities that are relevant, are important, and offer a break from the basic skills instruction that is at the core of your program. Most of all, we hope that you will enjoy activities that require you to use and perfect the creative teaching skills that are the true mark of an excellent adult educator!

Planning the Sessions

The activities in this issue are designed for group instruction. You might try teaching all four activities as part of a special, multi-part workshop called "Learning about Television." Alternately, the activities can stand alone and be integrated into regular classroom instruction as desired. In general, the earlier activities will be easier--for both learners and teachers--and the later activities will be more challenging. The time required for the activities will vary depending on your teaching style and the size of your group.

In planning the activities, we did our best to design them for use in classrooms that do not contain television sets or VCRs. However, most of the activities will be greatly enhanced if you can arrange to have this equipment available. After all, teaching these activities without having a television in the room is a little bit like offering swimming lessons without having a pool handy. If you do teach the activities without a TV, be sure to encourage your students to practice their critical viewing skills at home!

Activity #1: Examining Individual TV Viewing Habits

Overview and Rationale

This activity sets the stage for all the activities that follow. It gives your students a chance to examine their own TV viewing habits and their reasons for watching TV. In this activity, students will produce realistic estimates of the time they spend watching TV--estimates that might surprise them!

Skills Developed in this Activity

Functional reading, basic math, critical thinking, and critical discussion skills.

How to Prepare for this Activity

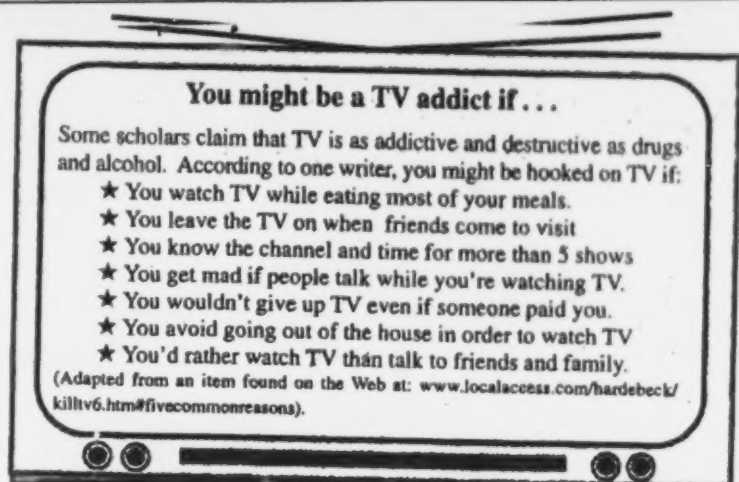
- ✓ Obtain a week's worth of TV listings for the previous week from your local paper or other source (some supermarkets have free listings available). Make copies for everyone in the group.
- ✓ Review the procedures and discussion questions below, and adapt them based on your own preferences and what you know about your learners.
- ✓ Review the box entitled "You might be a TV addict if . . ." and decide how you want to use it. You can turn it into a handout or a simple questionnaire. Decide how and when you will integrate it into the overall activity. Be creative!

Materials Needed for this Activity

- ✓ Multiple copies of local TV listings
- ✓ Paper and pencils.
- ✓ Calculators if available (and if you believe in using them with basic skills students).

What to Do in the Session

1. Open the session by saying that you'll be conducting a series of lessons about watching TV. Ask learners, "Do you like to watch TV? Why or why not?"
2. Tell learners that you're going to start by figuring out just how much television everyone watches. Distribute the copies of the TV listing. Have learners circle or underline every show they watched that week. Be sure they work through each day carefully. Have students help one another if they have trouble understanding the listing.



3. When they are finished marking, ask learners if they think that this was a typical week for them with respect to TV viewing. If they normally watch shows they missed, have them circle those shows, too. (NOTE: You might want to join in by examining your own viewing habits: students often take activities more seriously if you show their importance by participating.)
4. Now, using paper, pencil, and calculators, have students tally up their viewing hours. For most students, this will work best if they calculate daily totals first and then combine them into the week's total. Assist as necessary.
5. When everyone is finished, have students write their names and totals on the board where everyone can see them. OPTIONAL: If the math is going well, have students multiply their weekly estimates by 52 to determine how much TV they watch per year. They might then multiply that number by 50 to estimate how much TV they will watch in their adult lives.
6. Now launch a general discussion, using such questions as: "What do you think of these numbers? Do you believe you watch too much TV? How else might you have used these hours?"
7. Now that you've established how much, it's time to ask the question, "Why do you watch TV?" As students supply their answers to these questions, list them on the board. A typical list will include enjoyment, relaxation, fun, learning and information. (If students don't suggest information or learning, you should add them to the list--but it's better if it comes

from them.)

8. Lead a general discussion about "what TV is good for," ultimately focusing on how it can be good for learning and acquiring information.
9. Tell the students that the three activities that will follow are designed to help them learn better from TV by examining the quality of the information they get from television.

Activity #2: Planning the Evening News

Overview and Rationale

One of the most obvious ways in which students get information from TV is through news broadcasts. Educated adults tend to approach newscasts with critical minds, often asking questions like, "Why did they even include that story?" or "Am I supposed to believe that?" This activity is designed to simulate the kind of thinking that goes into putting together a news program and to help your students evaluate news stories with good old American skepticism.

Skills Developed in this Activity

Critical thinking (including prioritizing and contrasting), critical discussion skills.

How to Prepare for this Activity

- ✓ Review the procedures and discussion questions below, and adapt them based on your own preferences and what you know about your learners.
- ✓ Optional: Make video-recordings of one or more news shows for the group to watch and critique.

Materials Needed for this Activity

- ✓ A copy of the handout entitled "Activity #2: Making Choices About Television News," for each learner (see p. 6).
- ✓ Activity #2 Discussion Guide (see box below).
- ✓ Optional: A VCR and taped news shows.

What to Do in the Session

1. Start the session with a discussion about the meaning and value of news. Use broad questions such as these, doing your best to get everyone in the group talking: "What is news?" "Do you think it's important to keep up with the news?" "Have you ever been embarrassed when people asked you about a news event and you didn't know what they were talking about?" When students give answers, be sure to ask "Why?"
2. Now say something like this: "People get their news in lots of different ways. Some rely on friends to tell them things. Some read newspapers and magazines. Most Americans, however, get their news from television."
3. Ask students: "Do you like TV news shows?" "Do you believe everything you see on the TV news?" "Do you think news shows cover all the important stories?"
4. Distribute the handout. Say something like this: "Everyday, more things happen than can be covered by news shows. The people who work at TV stations have to decide which stories to cover and how much time to give to each story. Today, we're going to role-play planning a news show."
5. Go over the handout, making sure everyone understands the directions. Tell them that there are no right or wrong answers, but they should have reasons for the choices they make.
6. Have learners work through the list independently, marking one item in each group **T** (TV News), one **F** (File), and one **G** (Garbage Can).
7. When everyone is finished, have a discussion about each group of stories. The important part of the discussion relates to the *reasons why* the choices are made. Make a list of the reasons on the

board and discuss the list at the end of the activity.

Activity #2: Discussion Guide

As much as possible, keep discussion based on the reasons learners give for the choices they make. Typical choices for the top news story and reasons for those choices are as follows:

Group A: Most people will select #3. It is the most dramatic event, and has the most emotional impact.

Group B: Most People will select #4. People tend to be fascinated by the rich and powerful - even if it seems unjust.

Group C: Most people will select #8. People like to hear about events close to home - especially disasters.

Group D: Most people will select #11 because they like to see the mighty fall. In their hunger for scandal, people are willing to focus on things that are not central to an elected official's role. You might want to introduce Whitewater and Paula Jones into the discussion.

Group E: Most people will select #15. People like to hear about unusual or surprising things.

Group F: Most people will select #17. People prefer bad news to good news.

After listing the reasons for the choices on the board, ask learners to evaluate the way in which modern news shows make their choices. We are always hearing about the dramatic, the rich and powerful, local events, scandal, unusual events, and bad news. How does this affect our view of the world? What news don't we hear about?

Activity #3: Understanding TV Commercials

Overview and Rationale

We all watch television, and because we all watch television, we all see commercials. Some critics of TV and of TV advertising assert that TV doesn't deliver products to us as viewers, but that we viewers are actually the real product! These critics say that we *think* TV programs are brought to us by sponsors, but we are really brought to the spon-

sors via TV programs! While we may all know this on some level, it is productive to look at TV this way, and to analyze the commercials that are so present in our lives.

Most of us who watch television like to talk about what we see on TV. This activity will draw on your students' knowledge of TV, and will give them an opportunity to critically analyze commercials. This activity will require you to do some work at home -- watching TV commercials and bringing in examples. If you have a TV/VCR at school, it would be helpful to record commercials at home and bring them into the classroom. If not, the class will think of their favorite commercials and use them for the discussion. During this activity, students will read passages about commercials, will learn about the psychology used in ads, and will evaluate some commercials.

Skills Developed in this Activity

Critical reading, critical viewing, critical thinking, and critical discussion skills.

Materials Needed for this Activity

- ✓ A copy of the handout entitled "Activity #3: Understanding Television Commercials," for each learner (see p. 7).
- ✓ Activity #3 Discussion Guide (see box on p. 4).
- ✓ VCR and video tape if available.

How to Prepare for this Activity

- ✓ Preview the passages contained on the handout and try to predict your learners' ability to read them. If you believe that you need to "pre-teach" selected vocabulary, identify those words and decide the best way to define them for your learners.
- ✓ Record several commercials at home and bring them into class. Try to find commercials that illustrate the psychological "needs" that are discussed in the handout. For instance, you could find a cosmetic or shampoo commercial to illustrate the "need for attention," and a commercial for pizza or chicken take-out to illustrate the "basic physiological needs." Use your imagination -- this should be fun! If you do not have ac-

cess to a TV/VCR in your classroom, you should still spend some time watching TV so that you can choose relevant commercials to discuss in class.

✓ Preview the discussion guide in the box below, and adapt the questions based on your own worldview and what you know about your learners.

What to do in the Session

1. Before distributing the handout, ask your students: "Why do commercials exist? What is the purpose of commercials?" You want the group to see that commercials try to influence viewers to think certain ways. Some commercials offer information, some try to get you to buy products, and some just try to make you think favorably about companies. But they all try to influence how you think and act.

2. Now ask the group to think of some commercials. They will probably be able to quote slogans, sing jingles, and talk about the plots of many commercials. Write down their ideas about commercials on the board. Later in this activity you will lead a discussion with your students about different TV commercials. If you do not have access to a TV/VCR, you can use these commercials later during the discussion.

3. Now say: "In today's session, we're going to look at how commercials work and also learn about some of the psychology they use to sell us things." You might tell them that psychology is the study of how people think and feel about things. Distribute the handout.

4. Read through the first half of the handout. If you have strong readers in your group, select several to read; if not, read aloud while students follow along.

5. Now have students read each "need" from the list and discuss them one at a time. Ask them to think of examples of commercials that appeal to each need as you go down the list.

6. Now get the VCR ready or if you do not have access to a TV/VCR, use the commercials that students discussed earlier. Then use the discussion questions below to critique the ads. Use the same questions for each commercial.

Activity #3 : Discussion Guide

1. What kind of show do you think this ad would be in? Why? Who are they trying to reach?
2. What emotional appeals are they using?
3. What is a good reason to buy this product? What are the reasons the ad presents to you?
4. Does the commercial have anything to do with the product? What kind of image is this commercial portraying? Why?

Activity #4: Exploring Stereotypes on Television

Overview and Rationale

On prime-time TV, men outnumber women at least 3 to 1, while in the real world there are actually slightly more women in the population. Also, there are significantly smaller proportions of young people, old people, African-Americans, Hispanics, and other minorities represented on TV than in the United States population at large. These discrepancies encourage a negative and skewed view about the cultural diversity in the U.S.

Along with the misrepresentation of diversity in this country, television shows also portray stereotypes that misrepresent people in general. In a media and communications textbook called *Media/Impact*, a stereotype is defined as an "oversimplified idea of something, based on limited experience." This book goes on to say that "in themselves, stereotypes are a convenient mental device. They help us deal with the vast amount of reality that can never be known in detail. The problem is that most stereotypes contain only a kernel of truth and are so dangerous if taken to be the whole truth" (p. 232).

In this activity students will discuss and write about stereotypes and about how seeing stereotypes on television affects their lives.

Skills Developed in this Activity

Critical reading, thinking, and discussion skills; GED-style writing practice.

Materials Needed for this Activity

- ✓ A copy of a handout entitled "Stereotypes on Television," for each learner. (We didn't have the space to include a full-size version -- instead, on page 5 you will find a sample that you can use to create your own. Be creative and change it to fit your needs and the interests of your students!)
- ✓ A copy of the Activity #4 Discussion Guide for you (see box on p. 5).
- ✓ Paper and Pen for each learner.

How to Prepare for this Activity

- ✓ Preview the sample handout and create a suitable one to use with your class. You can use other stereotypes if you want. Here are some others you might want to consider: "Dumb Country Folk," "Disrespectful Teenagers," "Abusive Boss." Play around with them!
- ✓ Review the discussion guide below, and decide on any additional questions you might want to ask.

What to do in the Session

1. Before distributing the handout, ask students: "What are stereotypes? Do stereotypes serve a purpose? In what ways do you think they can be bad or good?" You want students to see that stereotypes can serve the purpose of organizing a complicated world, but that if taken as rigid "truth," stereotypes can cause harm to those groups who are being negatively stereotyped.

2. Now say something like this: "In today's activity, we are going to think about stereotypes on television, and then discuss and write about how seeing those stereotypes has affected us personally."

3. Ask students if they can think of any stereotypes that are presented in television shows. Discuss these with your students and write their ideas on the board.

4. Now distribute the handout and read it together with your students. After each individual stereotype, ask students if they can think of examples of that stereotype. Examples to get you started are included in the box below. After a short discussion of each stereotype, use the discussion guide to lead a general discussion about stereotypes and the effects of stereotypes.

5. Now it's time to do some writing. When students take the GED they're given a topic to write about. In order to simulate that experience, give each student a piece of paper with the following sentences at the top: "Television is full of stereotypes. How has watching TV affected your sense of the world or your feelings about yourself?"

6. At the end of the session or at the next session, it is time to give recognition for expressive writing. We suggest that you do not mark up all errors with a red pen. You could instead make copies of each paper for every student and pass them around. Let students take turns reading each other's essays, and discuss them in turn. After each essay is read, ask questions like these: "What is the best idea in this essay?" and "Is there anything in this essay that you disagree with?"

Activity #4: Sample Handout

The Ditzy Woman. She's goofy, ditzzy, and slow-witted. She always seems a step behind everyone else. She doesn't understand jokes, and people make fun of her.

The Nerd. People who are smart are just not cool! Nerds wear unfashionable clothes, and don't have many friends. Despite being so smart, they don't have many social skills, and have a hard time getting dates.

Grumpy Old Folks. They're old and cranky, and don't get along with people. They are hard of hearing, and hard to talk to. They're also often dumb, have poor memories, and repeat themselves when talking.

The Jolly Fat Person. Fat people are funny! They're jolly, always laughing and telling jokes. How lucky - They don't have a care in the world!

The Conniving Woman. This woman is bad! She'd downright evil. She's shrewd in business and in life. She'll do anything for money, and loves to steal boyfriends and husbands. She's power-hungry, manipulative, and unstoppable.

Activity #4: Discussion Guide

1. **The Ditzy Woman.** Examples: Lucy, Edith Bunker, Rebecca on Cheers, Phoebe on Friends, Synclaire on Living Single. Questions: What does this stereotype communicate about women? What's missing from her personality? Why do people think this is funny? Do you think this stereotype hurts women?

2. **The Nerd.** Examples: Jerry Lewis, Carlton on Fresh Prince, Steve Urkel on Family Matters, Andrea on 90210, Niles on Frasier. Questions: What does this stereotype say about smart people and learning in general? What's missing from this personality? Do people in the real world have to choose between being smart and well-liked?

3. **Grumpy Old Folks.** Examples: Fred Sanford, Grandpa Simpson, Sophia on Golden Girls, Estelle and Frank Costanza on Seinfeld, Martin Crane (father) on Frasier. Questions: Do you think it's kind to portray elders in such a dismissive way? What's missing from these personalities? What does it say when we define people by their weaknesses?

4. **The Jolly Fat Person.** Examples: Drew Carey, Fat Albert, Re-Run on What's Happening, Joe on Ellen, Drew Carey, the old Roseanne. Questions: How do you think overweight people feel about themselves when they see this stereotype on TV? What's missing from this personality? Do you think this stereotype hurts anyone's feelings?

5. **The Conniving Woman.** Examples: Joan Collins, Joan Crawford, Amanda on Melrose Place, Whitley on A Different World. Questions: We get ideas about life and relationships from TV. What message does this stereotype send to young people about how to act in relationships? What message does this stereotype send to people in general about how to behave in this world?

General Questions:

1. Why do people watch shows with stereotypes on them? Are stereotypes funny?
2. What is the impact on you when you see these stereotypes on TV? How do they affect you? How does watching stereotypes affect your lives? How does it make you feel?
3. How do you think different people would react to watching these stereotypes? For example, how would an overweight person react to the "Jolly Fat Person" stereotype as compared with someone who is not overweight?

Activity #2: Making Choices about Television News

Pretend that you are part of a TV news team. Your job is to decide what stories to cover on tonight's show. There are 18 stories to choose from, but you only have enough time to cover 6 stories. Which six will you choose? There are six groups of possible stories. Within each group:

- Choose one story to be on the news.
- Choose one story to file away in case you need it for another news show.
- Choose one story to throw in the garbage can.

Group A

1. A Little Boy Gets Sunburned
2. A Little boy is attacked by a swarm of bees.
3. A little boy is struck by lightning.

Group D

10. The mayor gives money to charity.
11. The mayor is caught cheating on income taxes.
12. The mayor announces a new educational program.

Group B

4. A rich housewife is raped
5. A convenience store worker is raped.
6. A homeless woman is raped.

Group E

13. A dog bites a dog.
14. A dog bites a man.
15. A man bites a dog.

Group C

7. A tornado strikes Oklahoma.
8. A tornado hits just north of the town where you live.
9. A tornado hits southern Brazil.

Group F

16. Trains are now safer than ever.
17. Two trains crash.
18. Two trains almost crash.

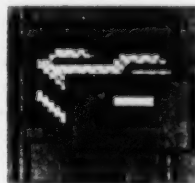
Where will you put each story?

T



Put it on the TV News.

F



File it away.

G



Put it in the garbage!!!

Activity # 3: Understanding Television Commercials

When we watch television, we don't see just our favorite shows, news, and sports. We also see commercials - lots of them! An average American sees about one hundred television commercials every day. That means by the time you are sixty years old, you may have seen over two million commercials!

How do commercials get on TV? Companies who want to advertise on television buy TV network time to show their commercials. This time costs on average \$120,000 for thirty seconds. But to advertise during an event like the Super Bowl, thirty seconds can cost as much as one million dollars! The production of commercials is also expensive. It can cost a million dollars to make a one minute commercial.

Since companies spend so much money on commercials, they want them to be effective. Advertisers want to influence people to think about their products in a positive way. They do research to find out who will be watching certain shows and then target their ads to those people. They use special effects and other techniques to present their products in the best light. Commercials also try to make you feel that you need the products they are selling. They use psychology to sell the products. They do this by making claims about their products, by creating certain images, and by appealing to your emotions.

Commercials use psychology to appeal to these five different needs:

1. **Need for friendship.** Many commercials send the message that if you buy the product they are selling, people will like you and you will have many friends. This is one of the most widely used techniques.
2. **Need to achieve.** Other commercials use figures such as sports heroes to give the message that if you buy a particular product, you will be more likely to get ahead in the game of life.
3. **Need for prestige.** Some commercials appeal to our need to be respected and admired, and to have high social status. Commercials selling fine wines, furniture and cars use this approach.
4. **"Basic" Needs such as eating, sleeping, and drinking.** We all have to eat, sleep, and drink. Many commercials target these needs through techniques such as showing pizza ads late at night.
5. **Need for attention.** Some commercials appeal to our need to be noticed, to be paid attention to. Ads for cosmetics and toiletries play upon this need.

Something to Think About

When we were doing research for this issue, we tapped into a whole world of "anti-televisionism," particularly on the Internet. Web sites with flashy titles like "Kill your television" were mixed with more scholarly reports about the effects of viewing on children and adults. The anti-television material is fun stuff and some is quite important, but we couldn't help thinking that maybe some people just like staring at a different type of tube. In writing the activities in this issue, we steered clear of anti-televisionism, choosing instead to treat TV as an unreliable but potentially important source of learning.

Approaching the topic of TV viewing in your classroom might be a little tricky and will require both honesty and tact. For instance, if you believe that TV undermines culture and deadens brains (we confess that we lean this way to some extent), you are going to have to control those sentiments, or risk creating a chasm between you and your students. We are not suggesting that you lie or even hide your feelings. But if you want group instruction to work, you need people to talk. If "the person in charge" comes out with very strong opinions that are at odds with those of group members, discussion dies -- and you'll have a devil of a time getting it going again.

As you approach these activities, try your best to let your students do most of the talking, and try to let them express their opinions before you express yours. When you do express your opinions, try not to come on too strong. Let your students know that these are just your opinions, and that their opinions are as valuable and valid as yours. (They are!) All of this will help you improve the dynamics of the group discussion and will prevent you from inadvertently halting the type of meaningful discussion that can result in valuable learning.

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Beyond Basic Skills

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